United States

Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management

Miles City Field Office

Bliss Thinning & Fence Range Improvement Project

Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA

For Further Information Please Contact:

Bureau of Land Management
Miles City Field Office
111 Garryowen Road
Miles City, Montana 59301
406-233-2800

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT REVIEW

OFFICE/AREA: Miles City Field Office	DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA
	DATE POSTED: 10-27-2012
NAME: Bliss Thinning and Fence	DATE DUE:
LOCATION: Powder River County T9S, R47E, Sec. 5 SW; Sec. 7 W2SW; Sec. 8 NW, SW, SE	

ORIGINATOR DATE/INITIALS	TITLE	ASSIGNMENT
Philip Reierson	Rangeland Management Specialist	All

REVIEWERS	TITLE	ASSIGNMENT	DATE/INITIALS
CJ Truesdale	Archaeologist	Cultural	CJ 11/30/2012 MT-020-12-372
Justin Hanley	Fuels	Fire/Fuels	JLH 01/15/2013
Jesse Hankins	Wildlife Biologist	Wildlife	JCH 12/4/12
Dena Lang	Outdoor Recreation Specialist	VRM	DJL 12/12/12
Reyer Rens	Supervisory RMS	Review	**RR 1/24/2013**

ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR 1/31/2013 **DATE**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA NUMBER: DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA

PROPOSED ACTION/TITLE TYPE: Bliss Ranch Thinning

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: Powder River County, MT
McKenzie Unit Allotment #10183
T9S, R47E, Sections 5, 7 and 8

PREPARING OFFICE: Miles City Field Office

APPLICANT: Permittee and US Department of the Interior; Bureau of Land Management; Miles City Field Office

DATE OF PREPARATION: 10-27-2012

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLAN: This proposed action is also in conformance with the Powder River RMP Record of Decision ROD approved in 1985, as amended by the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing for Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota ROD approved in 1997. The Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing for Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota ROD states on page 12 "Terms and conditions are a tool to achieve resource conditions in the standard". As amended by the Fire/Fuels Management Plan Environmental Assessment/Plan Amendment for Montana and the Dakotas (Plan Amendment) (United States Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management Montana State Office 2003). On page 2 of the ROD, it states "Wildlife design features contained in Appendix B of the EA will be recommended when planning and implementing fire and fuels management projects." On page 104 of the Appendix B — it states "to enhance wildlife species and habitat diversity in concert with fuels management objectives". As amended by the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing for Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota (1997). On page 11 of the ROD it states "guidelines are best management practices, treatments and techniques, and implementation of range improvements", on page 14 of the ROD it says "guidelines are provided to maintain or improve resource conditions in uplands and riparian habitats available to livestock grazing."

BACKGROUND: Permittee on the McKenzie Unit Allotment raised concern about the fuel load in the area around his ranch headquarters which includes approximately 40 acres of trees on BLM directly to the east of the headquarters. In 2011 the Little Fork Fire burned approximately 34,500 acres to the north of the headquarters including approximately 2,300 acres within the McKenzie Unit Allotment. In August of 2012 the Rough Fire burned approximately 800 acres within the allotment directly to the east of the ranch headquarters burning within 250 yards of the headquarters.

Program guidance for actions include the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, the Healthy Forests Initiative, the National Fire Plan and the Miles City Fire Management Plan, all which support treatment uses which progress toward meeting ecosystem health. One of the emphasis items of the National Fire Plan, the Healthy Forests Initiative, and the 10-year Cohesive Strategy is to reduce hazardous fuel accumulations and restore the health and natural processes within forests and rangelands.

SCOPING: This project was posted on Montana/Dakotas BLM webpage on 11/15/2012 for public information requests. Internal scoping identified the issues below. No additional issues were brought forth by the public.

ISSUES IDENTIFIED THROUGH SCOPING:

- Cultural:
  - Effects to cultural sites, paleontological localities, or sacred sites of interest to Tribes
- Livestock Grazing:
  - Effects to level of permitted use
- Grazing Administration:
  - Effects to livestock management on the allotment
- Wildlife:
  - Effects to habitats of game and nongame wildlife species
- Vegetation:
  - Effects to vegetative condition and meeting Standards for Rangeland Health

PURPOSE AND NEED: Reduce fuel load on BLM land that is in close proximity to the permittee's ranch headquarters and improve vigor of native understory plant species. The objective of the proposed project is to reduce the risks of catastrophic wildland fire to people, communities, and natural resources while restoring forest and rangeland ecosystems to closely match their historical structure, function, diversity and dynamics. This would benefit wildlife, soil protection and livestock grazing. To authorize and contract 8,600 feet of new fence to improve livestock distribution and assist with post fire vegetative recovery.

PROPOSED ACTION: The permittee and the Miles City Field Office proposes to treat Rocky Mountain Juniper and Ponderosa Pine using mechanical treatments and/or hand thinning to restore the resiliency in the forested system and to reduce risk to private property in proximity to federal lands from a large scale wildland fire disturbance event. The project area involves approximately 40 acres of BLM land within the McKenzie Unit Allotment in T9S, R47E, Section 7, W2SW, directly to the east of the permittee's ranch headquarters. Manual labor or mechanized equipment would be used to thin out the ponderosa pine and Rocky Mountain Juniper with the excess biomass being piled. During the fall and winter season the piles would then be burned.

Work would be completed when the use of heavy equipment would result in soil rutting of no more than four inches and on slopes no greater than 40%, unless work can be completed without rutting or disturbance to the soil surface. Action could begin in the summer of 2013 and could occur throughout the next 5 years or until the project is completed. No new road construction would be authorized; only existing roads and trails will be used to access the project area.

Following the thinning, monitoring for noxious weeds would be conducted throughout the growing season. If noxious weeds become present after the thinning, treatment would take place using proper herbicide and/or biological control.

Fence: Authorize the construction of a new barbed wire fence following the proposed route (See Map). The Skunk Draw Fence would be a standard four-wire fence built according to BLM Manual Handbook H-1741-1. The fence would be built on BLM land located in T9S, R47E,

Sec. 5 and 8 (see attached maps). Wire spacing would be 16"- 22"- 30" and 42" from the ground level. The top three wires would be barbed and the bottom wire would be smooth. No blade work would be authorized during the construction of this fence. Total length of fence would be approximately 8,600 feet. The only surface disturbance occurring during the construction would be from pickup trucks and ATV's along the proposed fence route.

ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION: In the no action alternative there would be no thinning treatment or fence construction on the BLM land.

ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED BUT DROPPED FROM FURTHER ANALYSIS – PRESCRBED BURNING: The use of prescribed fire was not considered for further analysis due to not meeting the purpose and need of the proposed action. Running prescribed fire through the proposed area without first creating defensible space for private property nearby does not meet the purpose and need of the project therefore not meet the purpose and need of the EA.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT:

The following critical resources have been evaluated and are not affected by the proposed action or the alternatives in this EA:

Mandatory Item	**Potentially Impacted**	**No Impact**	**Not Present On Site**
Threatened and Endangered Species			x
Floodplains			x
Wilderness Values			x
ACECs			x
Water Resources			x
Air Quality		x	
Cultural or Historical Values			X
Prime or Unique Farmlands			x
Wild & Scenic Rivers			x
Wetland/Riparian			x
Native American Religious Concerns		x	
Wastes, Hazardous or Solids			x
Invasive, Nonnative Species			x
Environmental Justice		x	

The following non-critical resources will not be impacted by this proposed action; therefore they will not be analyzed in detail by this Environmental Assessment: Lands/Realty, Socio-Economics, Forestry and Geology/Minerals.

Cultural/ Paleontology: The cultural environment of the Miles City Field Office as of May 2005 contained 7065 prehistoric and 2869 historic archeological sites as well as 1929 paleontological localities. Archeological sites occur in all counties encompassed by the field office; all but Roosevelt County contain paleontological localities. The project area is not situated within a PFYC significant formation. There are no previously recorded localities in the project area.

The overall archeological site density of the Miles City Field Office (historic and prehistoric) is 1 site per 93 acres (Aaberg et. al. 2006). Prehistoric sites distribute at 1 site per 130.8 acres (4.9/sq.

mile). Historic sites distribute at 1 site per 322 acres (2/sq. mile) for all surveyed acres within the Miles City Field Office. Archeological sites within Powder River County contain 23.2% of all recorded prehistoric sites and 8.1% of all historic sites within the Miles City Field Office (Aaberg et. al. 2006). Review of Cultural records indicates that there are five previously recorded cultural sites in the project area. They are 24PR0892, 24PR0893, 24PR0895, 24PR1572 & 24PR0894 they are all recorded as lithic material concentrations. No National Register Eligibility information available. Additionally, A Class III Cultural Inventory of 50 Acres around the proposed fuels reduction/thinning area did not result in the recording or location of cultural material. See Report Number: MT-020-12-372.

Fire: The site of the proposed project as well as the surrounding area evolved with wildfire. The most recent fires that have occurred in very close proximity to the project area have been the Little Fork Fire (2011) and the Rough Fire (2012). Examination of fire-scarred ponderosa pine trees shows a larger more intense fire than what is historically expected for this ecosystem.

The predominate cause of wildland fires is lighting, with less than one percent being man-caused. Fire regimes can be described based on the characteristics of the disturbance, the dominant or potential vegetation of an ecosystem, or fire severity based on the dominant vegetation (Agee, 1993). The project area falls into Fire Regime Condition Classes (FRCC) 2 and 3 (MCFO FMP, 2004). The fire regime is high frequency (Fischer and Clayton, 1983 Fire Groups 2 and 3) and would normally host fires of low intensity. However, fires of high intensity can be expected due to the high amount of fuel loading which have resulted from a combination of limited timber harvest and fuels management, lack of frequent fire and possibly overgrazing which may have reduced competition to ponderosa pine seedlings from grass. These conditions have allowed juniper and ponderosa pine to increase in density. Probably the element of this combination with the largest affect is the lack of frequent fire (Burkhardt, 1976).

This stand is categorized as Fire Group Two as described by (Fisher and Clayton, 1983), a warm, dry ponderosa pine habitat type. This group consists of open stands of ponderosa pine with predominantly grass understory. Some stands have a dense mixed-aged understory of ponderosa pine. Interior ponderosa pine evolved under a regime of frequent surface fires (5-25 years) and infrequent mix-severity and stand replacement fires. Ponderosa pine communities at lower elevations experienced fires that were mostly low to moderate severity surface fires, which maintained open-grown, uneven-aged, park-like stands. Fire suppression over the past 100+ years has created an artificial, un-natural ecosystem, which greatly departs from historic conditions.

Livestock Grazing: The permittee grazes cow/calf pairs, yearling heifers and horses on the allotment during the summer and fall months. There is no associated grazing plan administered by the BLM on this allotment. Pipelines and troughs provide the primary sources of livestock water on the allotment. The allotment is cross fenced, which allows the permittee to graze using a rotational system. Supplemental feeding is done on deeded lands during the late fall through early spring. There is no associated grazing plan administered by the BLM on this allotment.

Recreation: Public access is limited in and around the proposed project area. Public access is available mainly through foot traffic from the adjoining Sams Allotment to the east. Hunting is the primary recreational activity in the proposed project area; however, hiking, trapping, and horseback riding may occur as well.

Soils: Soils generally developed from residuum derived from the Fort Union Formation. The principal ecological sites are shallow and sandy (MLRA 58A, 10-14 p. z). The surface texture is typically a loam. Terrain is rugged**.** The elevation ranges around 4,300 feet. The departure from the natural fire regime within the project area has resulted in altered erosion rates, soil development, nutrient cycling, and soil biodiversity.

Vegetation: Primary vegetation consists of ponderosa pine and rocky mountain juniper as well as perennial grasses including; western wheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, needle and thread, and Sandberg bluegrass and various forbs including prairie coneflower, slimflower scurfpea and silverleaf scurfpea. The shrubs in the project area include silver sagebrush, yucca and skunkbrush sumac. Very heavy densities of ponderosa pine and rocky mountain juniper exist in the proposed project area.

VRM: The project area lies within a VRM Class IV objective (see attached map). The objective of class IV is to provide for management activities which require major modification of the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape can be high. These management activities may dominate the view and be major focus of viewer attention. However, every attempt should be made to minimize the impact of these activities through careful location, minimal disturbance and repeating the basic elements.

Wildlife: Wildlife game species in the proposed project area include elk, mule deer, turkeys and sharp-tailed grouse. The area also provides winter habitat for mule deer. Non-game species such as raptors, migratory birds, and various small mammals, as well as reptiles and amphibians may also inhabit or frequent the area. A variety of non-game species occupy the allotment, including raptors and songbirds. BLM Sensitive Species are known to inhabit or frequent the area; however no Threatened or Endangered species or habitat for such is known to exist.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS:

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACTS FROM PROPOSED ACTION:

Cultural/ Paleontology: There will be no impacts to cultural resources through the fuels reduction/thinning portions proposed action. The proposed fence meets inventory exemption criteria H8110-1, Appendix I Range I.

Livestock Grazing: After the thinning project livestock forage would increase due to the reduction in the density and canopy cover ponderosa pine and rocky mountain juniper. With the construction of the Skunk Draw Fence the North Pasture would be split creating two pastures of similar size. This will allow for increased management flexibility for the permittee allowing for change in season of use and shortened grazing duration.

Recreation: Recreational opportunities would see little to no impact due to the small size and close proximity of the project to the permittee's ranch headquarters.

Soils: Soil disturbance would occur primarily from soil mixing, compaction, and ground-cover removal, exposing soils to accelerated erosion by wind and water. Compaction would decrease nutrient cycling, and increase runoff until the site returns to natural rates due to freeze–thaw cycles. Though there are steep slopes within the project area, treatments would be applied when environmental conditions reduce impacts to soils (e.g., frozen or dry soils). Slash material would

shade the soil surface reducing soil temperatures and increasing moisture content, creating microsites for herbaceous seedling establishment. Slash material would also result in increased soil bacteria populations leading to depleted nitrogen content for several years, followed by increased fertility and pH. Project area soils are resilient to disturbance and would recover natural rates of erosion, compaction, and have increased productivity within two to five years following disturbance.

Soil compaction may occur along fence route during construction but should return to pre disturbance levels through natural freeze-thaw cycles.

Vegetation: Removing the dense stands of ponderosa pine and rocky mountain juniper would increase production of native grasses, forbs and shrubs. There would be an increase of available area for grasses, forbs and shrubs to re-establish. Vegetative cover would be reduced for a short period of time but detrimental long term effects would not be expected. Mature ponderosa pine tree health would be enhanced by a reduction in competition for water and nutrients. Opening up the canopy would allow for increased production of herbaceous and shrub species that are currently lacking in most of the current understory.

Localized vegetative disturbance will occur along the fence route however this impact should become less evident with time, usually within the current growing seasons. These areas may become weedy with annual vegetation, however that higher level of disturbance is not expected. No blading is allowed, but increased traffic along the fence line is anticipated during construction. Construction of the fence would allow livestock to rotate pastures and change timing and duration of livestock grazing. The change in timing from year to year should allow for plants to complete growth cycle without being grazed every other year. Construction of the fence will shorten grazing duration therefore limiting regrazing of individual plants reducing the impacts on the vegetative community as a whole. A deferred grazing system could improve current rangeland health and help the allotment to continue to meet Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health.

Water: The proposed action is located within Pasture Creek, which is a tributary to Otter Creek. These creeks flow north to the Tongue River. The Pasture Creek drainage is ephemeral, flowing only with snow melt and/or heavy rain event.

VRM: Reducing canopy cover will create a change to the visual texture of the area; however this should not dominate the view of the casual observer. New noxious weed infestations created by the proposed project could also create a short term visual change for the area. Implementation of the proposed action, such as the slash piles, would create a short term visual intrusion. After burning of slash piles and natural rates of decomposition occur, the action would not detract from the existing character of the landscape.

Wildlife: Wildlife would be temporarily displaced as a result of implementing both the proposed thinning project and the fencing project. In response to the thinning project, post implementation, benefits to wildlife would be expected as vegetative diversity and abundance should reflect well upon wildlife. The proposed fence would also benefit vegetative species and ultimately wildlife habitat as increased grazing manageability and the deferred grazing system benefit residual cover and species diversity. The addition of a new fence within this area may pose some hazards to wildlife and may restrict movements of deer and/or elk. This would be mitigated by following BLM wire spacing requirements described in the proposed action. It is possible some immobile

animals, such as small burrowing mammals, would be destroyed during the implementation of either project.

Typically, large mammals would be temporarily displaced from the project area; however, the proximity of the thinning project area to the ranch headquarters likely precludes the presence of many large mammal animals such as deer and elk. It is expected though, that any resident animals would return to pre-treatment conditions shortly after implementation.

To mitigate effects to nesting migratory bird species in the subject area, no disturbance would occur from April 15-July 15.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACTS FROM ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION:

Livestock Grazing: Under the no action alternative, livestock grazing and management would remain at existing levels. Livestock forage and management options would not increase under this alternative.

Recreation: The recreation opportunities will not change under this alternative.

Soils: Conifers would continue to maintain an altered soil system with erosion rates, soils development, nutrient cycling and soil biodiversity altered from the natural regime. Soils would also be susceptible to catastrophic wildland fire with possible high soil burn severity. High soil burn severity from a catastrophic wildland fire would result in sterilized soils, increased pH, reduced fertility, increased overland flow, and/or produce a hydrophobic surface layer, which would inhibit water infiltration.

Vegetation: The vegetative community would continue to change in both the short and long term. The number of ponderosa pine trees and Rocky mountain juniper will increase until disease or wildfire alters the landscape. Grasses, forbs and shrubs will decrease as they are outcompeted by conifers.

Timing and duration of livestock grazing would continue under current system allowing for potential regrazing of individual plants.

Wildlife: No immediate impacts to wildlife are obvious, but without intervention, the continual decline in range condition would lead to less desirable habitats, and ultimately a decline in use by wildlife.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS:

The area would be monitored for noxious weeds. Any noxious weeds found in the project area would be treated with herbicides and/or biological controls following the thinning.

The area would need to be monitored for soil erosion.

CONSULTATION/COORDINATION: Permittee and BLM-Miles City Field Office

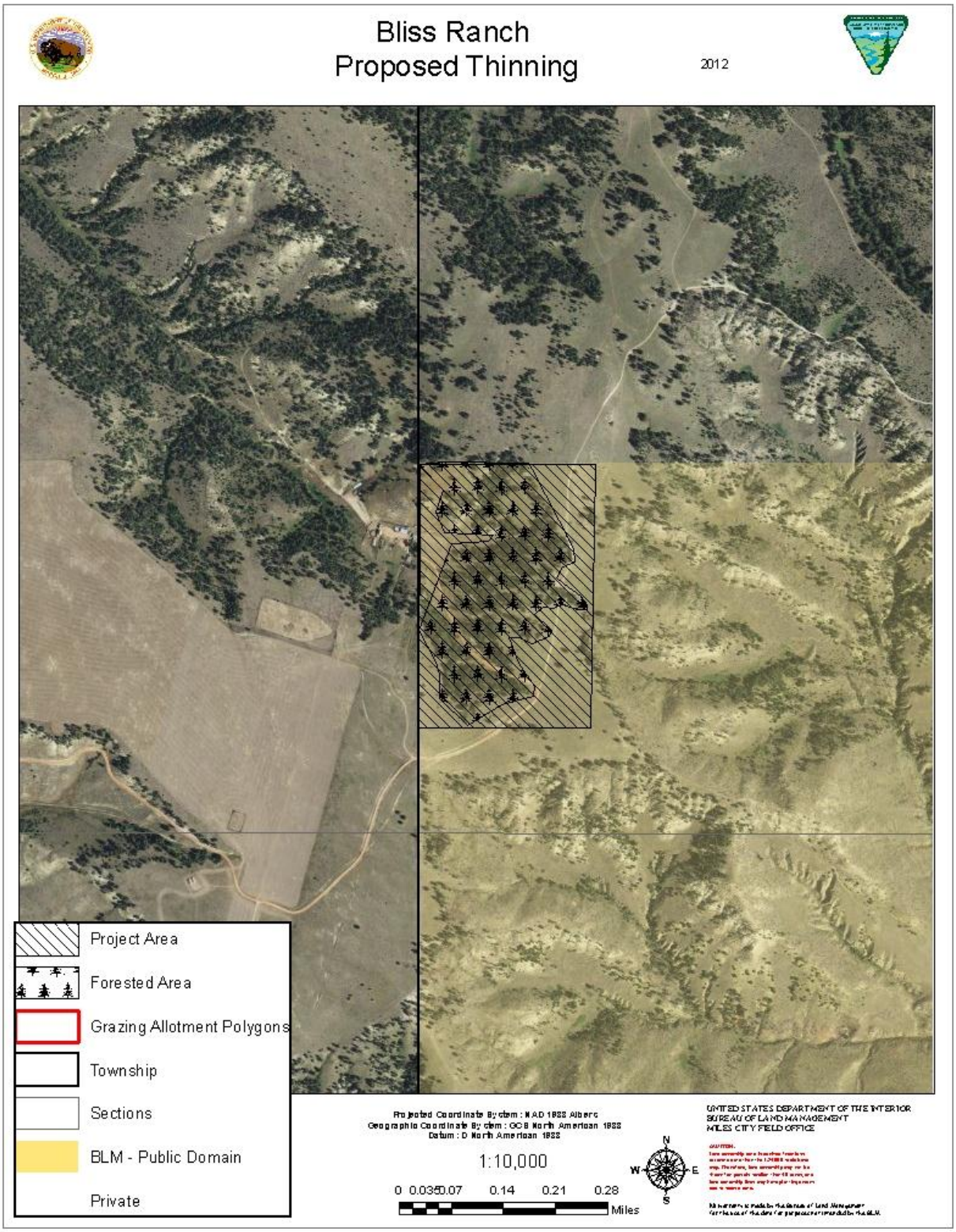
LIST OF PREPARERS:
Philip Reierson – Rangeland Management Specialist
Jesse Hankins – Wildlife Biologist
Justin Hanley – Fire Management Specialist
CJ Truesdale – Archaeologist
Dena Lang – Outdoor Recreation Specialist
Reyer Rens – Supervisory RMS
Kathleen Bockness- Environmental Coordinator

References:

Aaberg, Stephen A., Hanna, Rebecca R., Crofutt, Chris., Green, Jayme., and Vischer, Marc. 2006 *Class I Overview of Paleontological & Cultural Resources in Eastern Montana*, Volume I, Prepared for: ALL Consulting, BLM Miles City Field Office, Miles City MT.

Fisher, William C., and Bruce D. Clayton. "Fire ecology of Montana forest habitat types east of the Continental Divide." *NTIS, SPRINGFIELD, VA(USA). 1983.* (1983).
Burkhardt, J. Wayne, and E. W. Tisdale. "Causes of juniper invasion in southwestern Idaho." *Ecology* (1976): 472-484.

Agee, J.K. Fire Ecology of Pacific Northwest Forests. Island Press, Washington, D.C. (1993)


Bliss Ranch
Proposed Thinning
2012
Project Area
Forested Area
Grazing Allotment Polygons
Township
Sections
BLM - Public Domain
Private
Projected Coordinate System : NAD 1983 Albers
Geographic Coordinate System : GCS North American 1983
Datum : D North American 1983
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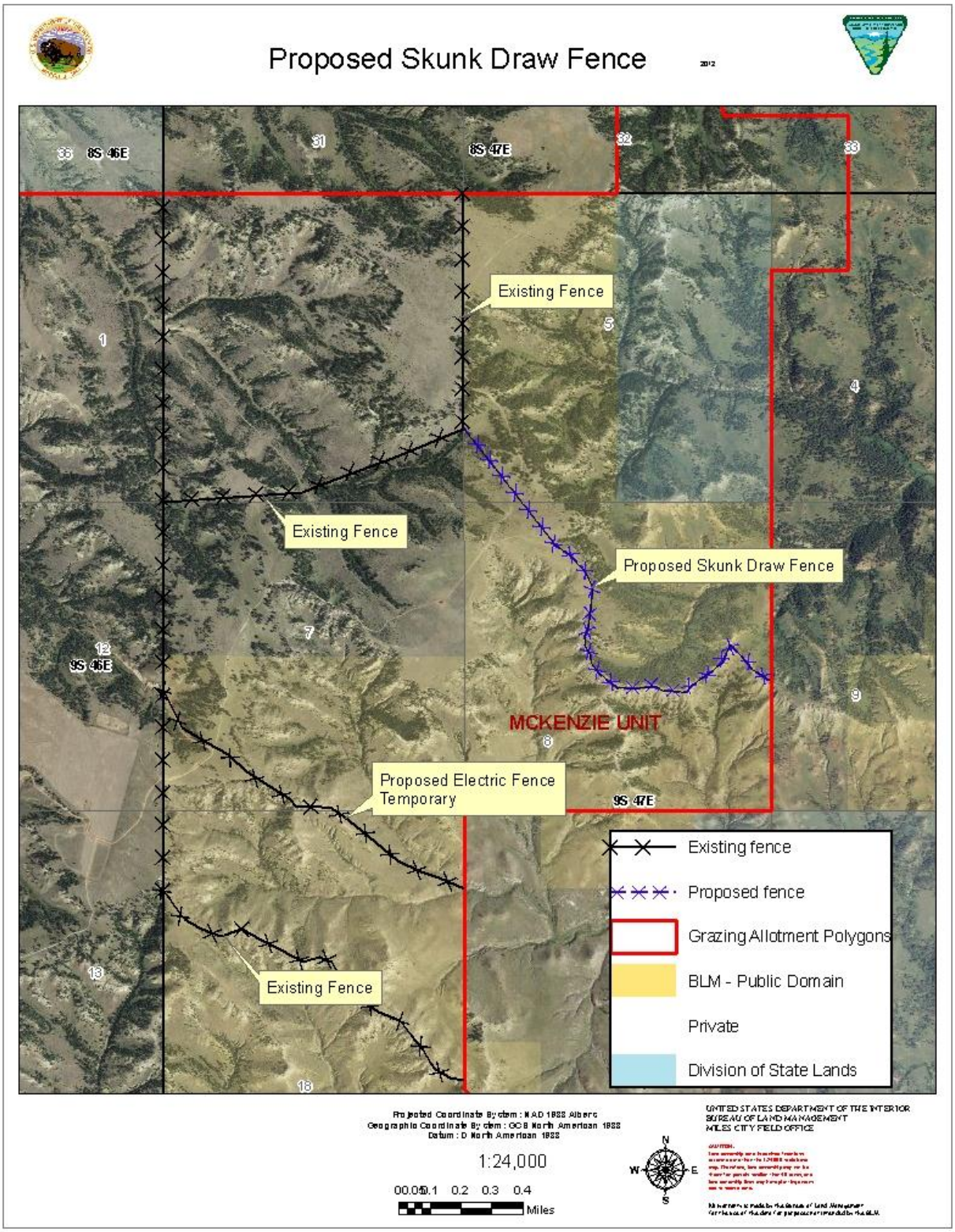
Proposed Skunk Draw Fence
2012
8S 46E
31
8S 47E
32
33
Existing Fence
5
1
4
Existing Fence
Proposed Skunk Draw Fence
7
12
9S 46E
9
MCKENZIE UNIT
8
Proposed Electric Fence
Temporary
9S 47E
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Proposed fence
Grazing Allotment Polygons
BLM - Public Domain
Private
Division of State Lands
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18
18
Projected Coordinate System : NAD 1983 Albers
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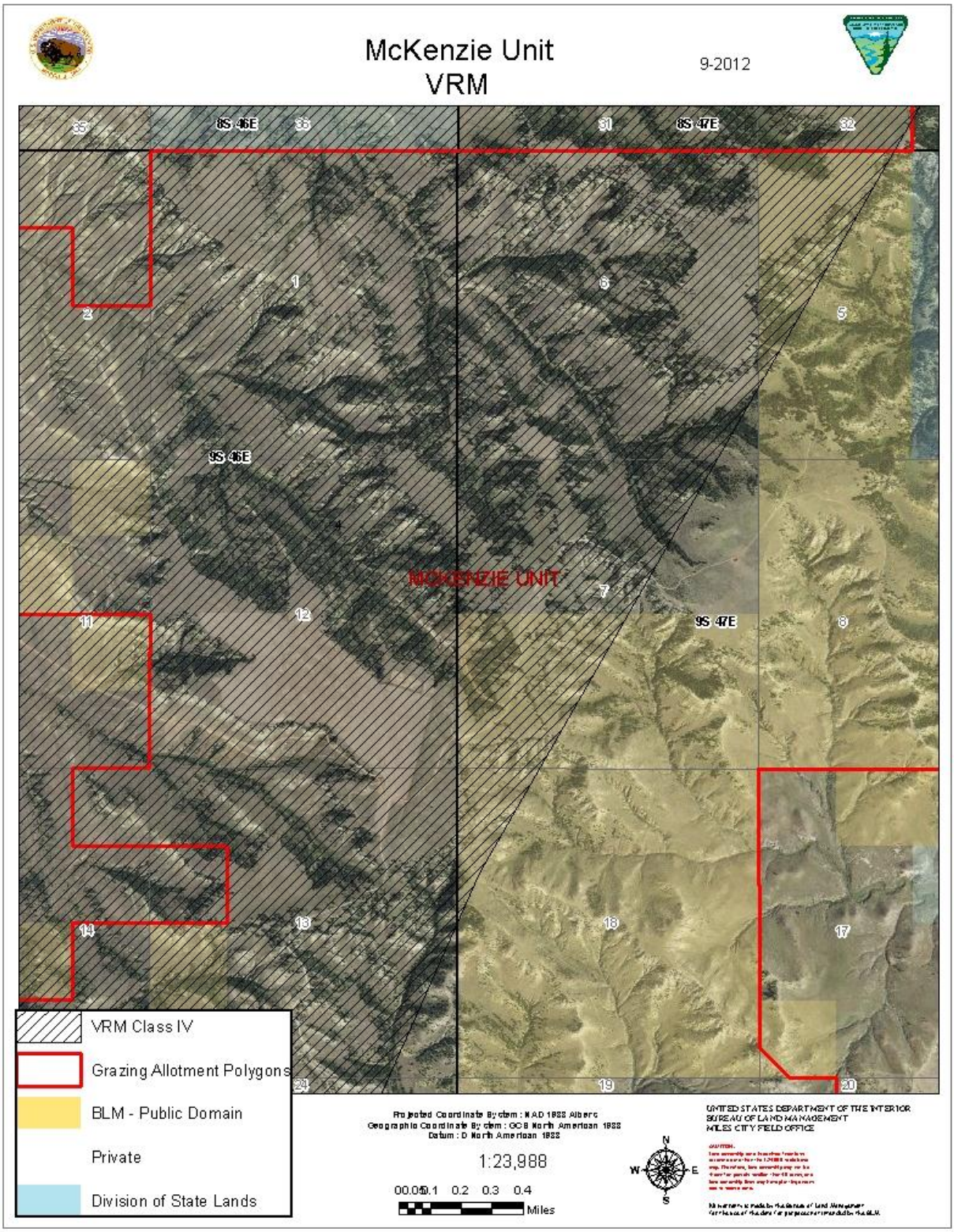
McKenzie Unit
VRM
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8S 46E
8S 47E
9S 46E
9S 47E
MCKENZIE UNIT
VRM Class IV
Grazing Allotment Polygons
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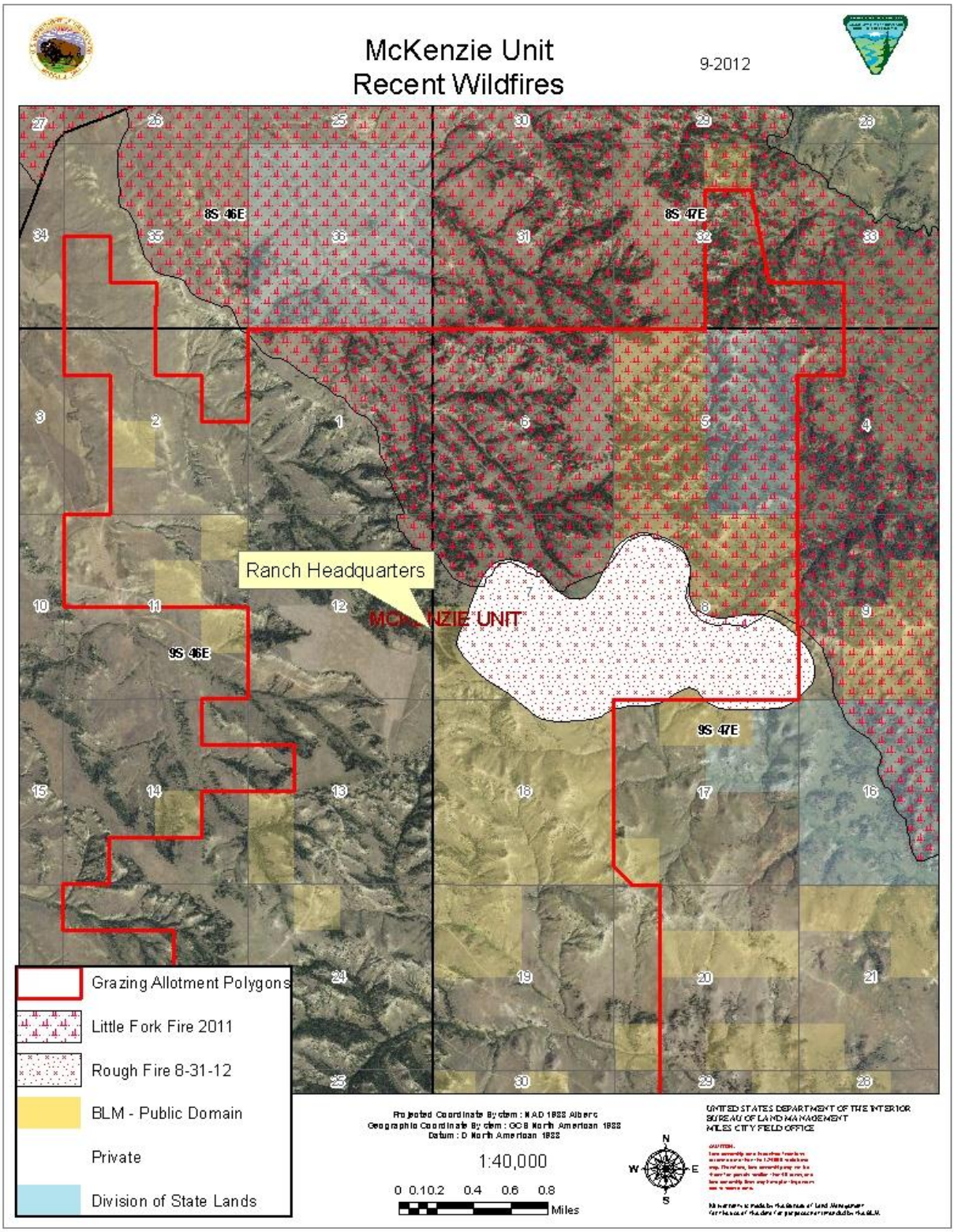
McKenzie Unit
Recent Wildfires
9-2012
8S 46E
8S 47E
9S 46E
9S 47E
Ranch Headquarters
MCKENZIE UNIT
Grazing Allotment Polygons
Little Fork Fire 2011
Rough Fire 8-31-12
BLM - Public Domain
Private
Division of State Lands
Projected Coordinate System : NAD 1983 Albers
Geographic Coordinate System : GCS North American 1983
Datum : D North American 1983
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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA

BACKGROUND

The origin of the environmental assessment was due to the request by the permittee and the BLM to analyze the need to reduce the risks of catastrophic wildland fire to people and natural resources while restoring forest and rangeland ecosystems to closely match their historical structure, function, diversity and dynamics

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

On the basis of the information contained in the EA (DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA), and all other information available to me, it is my determination that:

(1) The implementation of the Proposed Action or alternatives will not have significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the Powder River Resource Management Plan approved in 1985, as amended by the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing for Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota Record of Decision approved in 1997, as amended by the Fire/Fuels Management Plan Environmental Assessment/Plan Amendment for Montana and the Dakotas (Plan Amendment) (United States Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management Montana State Office 2003).

(2) The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Record of Decision for the Powder River Resource Management Plan, as amended; and

(3) The Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment.

Therefore, an environmental impact statement or a supplement to the existing environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.

This finding is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR '1508.27), both with regard to the context and to the intensity of the impacts described in the EA.

Context

The proposed action is in accordance with the Powder River RMP. The permittee and BLM's Miles City FO proposes mechanical treatments and/or hand thinning of Rocky Mountain Juniper and Ponderosa Pine on BLM lands within the Mckenzie Allotment (#10183) located in Powder River County, MT. Mechanical and/or hand thinning will be used to reduce the dense stands of regeneration and early successional phase ponderosa pine and juniper to improve the vigor of native grasses, forbs and shrubs and reduce fuel loads.

The project area involves approximately 40 acres of BLM land within the Mckenzie Allotment in T9S, R47E, Section 7 directly to the east of the permittee's ranch headquarters. Manual or mechanized equipment would be used to thin out the ponderosa pine and Rocky Mountain Juniper with the excess biomass being piled. During the fall and winter season the piles would then be burned. This action is

proposed in order to reduce risk to private property in proximity to Federal lands in which conditions are conducive to a large-scale wildland fire disturbance event and for which a significant threat to human life or property exists.

Work would be completed when the use of heavy equipment would result in soil rutting of no more than four inches and on slopes no greater than 40%, unless work can be completed without rutting or disturbance to the soil surface. Action could begin in the summer of 2013 and could occur throughout the next 5 years or until the project is completed. No new road construction would be authorized; only existing roads and trails will be used to access the project area.

Following the thinning, monitoring for noxious weeds would be conducted throughout the growing season. If noxious weeds become present after the thinning, treatment would take place using proper herbicide and/or biological control.

Fence: Authorize the construction of a new barbed wire fence following the proposed route (See Map). The Skunk Draw Fence would be a standard four-wire fence built according to BLM Manual Handbook H-1741-1. The fence would be built on BLM land located in T9S, R47E, Sec. 5 and 8 (see attached maps). Wire spacing would be 16"- 22"- 30" and 42" from the ground level. The top three wires would be barbed and the bottom wire would be smooth. No blade work would be authorized during the construction of this fence. Total length of fence would be approximately 8,600 feet. The only surface disturbance occurring during the construction would be from pickup trucks and ATV's along the proposed fence route.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity/severity of the impacts anticipated from the proposed action and all alternatives relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the CEQ.

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. The analysis documented in EA DOI-BLM-MT-C020-2013-0029-EA did not identify any individual significant adverse short-term or long-term impacts. In the long-term, under the proposed action, maintenance in the overall rangeland health and reduced fuel loads within the Mckenzie Unit Allotment will occur.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety. No aspects of the proposed action have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. No known historic or cultural resource sites would be affected by the proposed action. A pre-project cultural resource survey was conducted in conjunction with the location of the EA and did not result in the identification or recording of cultural resources. There are no parks, prime farmlands, WSAs, ACECs, or wild and scenic rivers in the planning area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. The effects of the actions planned under the Proposed Action or alternatives are similar to many other rangeland improvement projects implemented within the scope of the Powder River RMP, as amended. "Highly controversial" in the context of 40 CFR 1508.27(b)(4), refers to substantial

disagreement within the scientific community about the environmental effects of a proposed action. No unique or appreciable scientific controversy has been identified regarding the effects of the Proposed Action.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment not previously considered and analyzed in EISs to which this EA is tiered.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. The proposed action neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. The proposed action is consistent with actions appropriate for the area as designated by the Powder River RMP, as amended.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. The environmental analysis did not reveal any cumulative effects beyond those already analyzed in the EISs which accompanied the Powder River RMP, as amended.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. The proposed action will not adversely affect any district, site, highway, structure, or object listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. A review of BLM and Montana SHPO Cultural Resource Records show five previously recorded cultural sites within the locations identified above. No National register data is available for the sites; they are all lithic material concentrations. See BLM Cultural Resources Report MT-020-12-372 for details. The proposed action would not adversely affect historic properties.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. There are no threatened or endangered species or habitat in the area of the proposed action. There are no threatened or endangered plant species or habitat in the area.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action is in compliance with federal, state and local law and requirements relative to environmental protection. It is also in conformance with the Powder River Resource Management EIS/ROD.

2/11/2013

Todd D. Yeager
Field Manager
Miles City Field Office

Date

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MILES CITY FIELD OFFICE
RECORD OF DECISION
DOI-BLM-MT-020-2013-0029-EA

DECISION

It is my decision to select the Proposed Action Alternative as described in the Bliss Thinning EA. The EA and the FONSI analyzed the selected alternative and found no significant impacts. Implementation of this decision will result in the use mechanical and/or hand thinning will be used to reduce the dense stands of ponderosa pine and juniper to improve the vigor of native grasses, forbs and shrubs and reduce fuel loads. Construction of the Skunk Draw Fence will result in improved livestock distribution and assist with post fire vegetative recovery.

ALTERNATIVES

In addition to the selected alternative, the EA considered two other alternatives. The two alternatives are, "No Action" alternative and "Prescribed Burning Alternative." The "No Action alternative would carry out no management activities at this time. The Prescribed Burning Alternative was considered but dropped from further analysis because it did not meet the purpose and need.

RATIONALE FOR SELECTION

The purpose of this action is to reduce fuel load on BLM land that is in close proximity to the permittee's ranch headquarters to help reduce fire hazard, improve vigor of native understory plant species, and to construct a new fence to improve livestock distribution and assist with post fire vegetative recovery, while continuing to meet the Standards for Rangeland Health. The selected alternative would most effectively meet the purpose of the action.

The No Action Alternative would carry out current management actions thus not meeting the purpose and need of reducing the dense stands of ponderosa pine and juniper to improve the vigor of native grasses, forbs and shrubs and reduce fuel loads.

The Prescribed Burning alternative would meet the purpose but due to close proximity to the permittee's headquarters the risk burning structures on private land is too great.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The permittee associated with the allotment in the project area has been consulted. An interdisciplinary team consulted during the field tours and EA process of the project. The EA was made available online via the Miles City Field Office NEPA log.

IMPLEMENTATION

Once the Bliss Thinning EA, FONSI, and Decision Record are approved, a Cooperative Range Improvement Agreement would be signed with the Cooperator. Once the Cooperative Range Improvement Agreement is approved by the Authorized Officer, the Cooperator would be able to proceed with the project.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OPPORTUNITIES

The following sections of the Code of Federal Regulations, chapter 43- §4120 and §4160 provide authority for the actions proposed in this decision. The language of the cited sections can be found at a library designated as a federal depository or at the following web address: http://www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr/index.html.

This rangeland improvement decision may be protested under 43 CFR 4160.2 or appealed under 43 CFR 4.470 and 43 CFR 4160.1-4. Protests of the decision must be filed either in writing or in person with this office within 15 days after receipt of this decision. The appeal may be accompanied by a petition for stay of the decision in accordance with CFR 4.21, pending final determination of an appeal. The appeal and decision for stay must be filed in the office of the authorized officer, as noted above, within 30 days following receipt of the final decision, or within 30 days after the date the proposed decision becomes final.

2/11/2013

Todd D. Yeager
Field Manager
Miles City Field Office

Date